



From Harm to Unfairness:

What Inferences Do Toddlers Draw About Wrongdoers' Moral Characters?

Chitra Iyer, Fransisca Ting, and Renée Baillargeon
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

INTRODUCTION

- Prior studies indicate that sociomoral reasoning in infants and toddlers is guided by a number of principles including *harm avoidance* (individuals should minimize harm to others), *fairness* (individuals should act fairly), and *ingroup support* (individuals should support members of their groups).
- Infants and toddlers use these principles to evaluate individuals' actions and draw inferences about their moral characters. Thus, children judge actions that violate sociomoral principles as unacceptable and actions that adhere to the principles as acceptable.
- The principles interact in predictable ways. For example, mild unprovoked harm may be viewed as acceptable or permissible when directed at outgroup individuals, but as unacceptable when directed at ingroup individuals.

QUESTIONS

- How do toddlers reason about moral character deficiencies? Do toddlers expect a deficiency in one principle (e.g. harm avoidance) to extend to another principle (e.g. fairness), resulting in a broadly deficient moral compass?
- In the present research, toddlers watched a puppet show in which a wrongdoer first harmed a victim. Next, the wrongdoer divided windfall resources either fairly or unfairly between two ingroup members.
- Two variables were manipulated in the harmful actions:
 - Group membership:** whether the wrongdoer harmed an outgroup individual (**outgroup experiment**) or an ingroup individual (**ingroup experiment**)
 - Harm severity:** whether the wrongdoer produced one harmful action (**1-action condition**) or three harmful actions (**3-action condition**)
- After seeing the wrongdoer produce harmful actions, would toddlers (a) still expect the wrongdoer to act fairly or (b) hold no expectation as to whether the wrongdoer would act fairly or unfairly?

PREDICTIONS

- Because mild negative actions towards the outgroup are not viewed as violations of the harm-avoidance principle, toddlers in the **1-action condition** of the **outgroup experiment** might still expect the wrongdoer to act fairly.
- If toddlers expect a deficiency in one sociomoral principle to extend to other principles, then toddlers in all other conditions, who first saw violations of the harm-avoidance principle, might hold no expectations about whether the wrongdoer would act fairly or unfairly.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

- 79** toddlers, **32** males and **47** females
- Age range:** 21 months, 18 days to 30 months, 16 days ($M = 25$ months, 2 days)

PROCEDURE

- Violation-of-Expectation (VOE)** paradigm was used to assess toddlers' expectations, by comparing their looking times at the two test events

1 familiarization trial
1 or 3 harm trial(s)
2 test trials

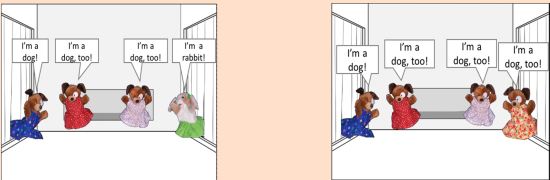
DESIGN

Outgroup Experiment 39 toddlers

Ingroup Experiment 40 toddlers

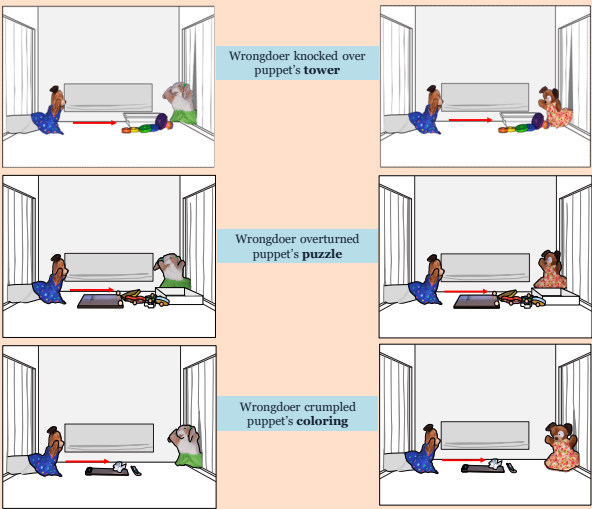
Familiarization Trial

Puppets announced their group memberships.



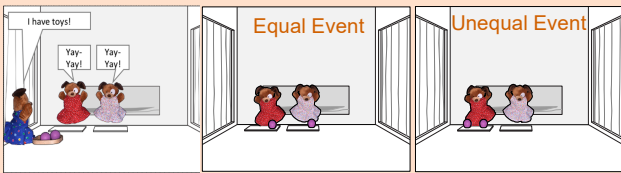
Harm Trial(s)

Toddlers first saw an outgroup (outgroup experiment) or ingroup (ingroup experiment) puppet play with a toy. Next, the wrongdoer puppet entered the stage, watched the other puppet play, and then destroyed her toy. Toddlers in the **3-action** condition received 3 harm trials, and toddlers in the **1-action** condition received only one harm trial (counterbalanced).



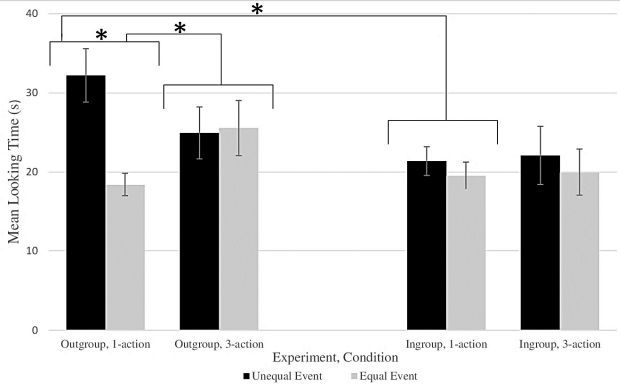
Test Trials

The wrongdoer divided two identical toys (balls) between two ingroup puppets. In the **unequal** event, the wrongdoer acted unfairly and gave both toys to the same puppet (side counterbalanced). In the **equal** event, the wrongdoer acted fairly and gave one toy to each puppet. The two events were presented in two successive trials, with order counterbalanced between participants.



RESULTS

Mean Looking Times by Experiment, Condition, and Event



CONCLUSION

- After seeing a wrongdoer direct 3 harmful actions at either an ingroup or an outgroup individual, 2-year-old toddlers attributed to the wrongdoer a broadly deficient moral character, and they did not expect the wrongdoer to act fairly.
- When the wrongdoer directed 1 harmful action at an ingroup individual, toddlers similarly attributed to the wrongdoer a broadly deficient moral character, and they no longer expected the wrongdoer to act fairly.
- Only when the wrongdoer directed 1 harmful action at an outgroup individual (something toddlers generally do not view as unexpected) did they refrain from attributing a deficient moral character to the wrongdoer, as indexed by the fact that they still expected the wrongdoer to act fairly.
- Thus, mild harm to the ingroup, and severe harm to either the ingroup or the outgroup, all lead toddlers to attribute broad deficiencies in moral character that extend to other moral contexts.
- Future directions will examine just what it means when toddlers no longer expect a wrongdoer to act fairly. Do toddlers suspend all expectations, or do they expect a wrongdoer, at least in some circumstances, to be predisposed to selfish behavior, due to a deficient moral compass too weak to countercheck self-interest?

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